The Cry on the Trail.

How It Wrought a Great Change at Lone Pine Ranch.

By GERTRUDE DIX.

IN the high, warm, sitting room of a lonely ranch-house, with brown, unplastered walls, and shore and windows open to the mountain side, a man sat at a small desk table reading over a pile of cherished letters. They were written by a woman; and she lived in a house on Beacon street, Boston, and knew about such books, with music, and with art. To the reader, who was hard-pressed in the battle of life, they seemed to fall him into a strange tremulous holse, while he longed for the more concentrated whir of a hundred splendid beauties of a fireside. Ah, they were so intellectual, these letters, and they were so wonderful, he could read between their lines! As he turned over the pages, the child of those years old, with a large rent in her pinafore, a tan in from time to time from the open air, and a head full of fun, got up the heart of the man for the woman she loved, and was willing to die for. Both felt they needed her—han and child, they needed her samonal.

At length he took his pen and began to write to her. All her letters addressed him as "Dear Mr. Geraldine," and to this date had been invariably superscripted to "Dear Miss Vining." Now he broke through the veils of reserve. He wrote to her as the dearest woman on earth, called her by her name. He threw aside all the topics with which they had dallied so long, and wrote simply of himself and his own hopes and fears. He told her how for years he had been struggling in the world to come out to him; how his poverty had forbidden his doing so; and how, in spite of all his efforts, he had remained poor and struggling, without anything to give her. Two months ago he had believed that at last his chance had come. He had gone on to the Trinity Mountains in the interest of a partnership in a promising "prospect," and had received from a friend. But of the long stage-journey from Redding through the heat and dust, he had fallen in with an unfortunate Englishman, very sick with typhoid, who had implored him to accompany him and see him on his legs again. Circumstances had been such that it had been impossible for any man humanity not to stay with this man and his wife in the midst of a mosquito camp. So he had nursed and tended him, and had experienced the satisfaction of pulling him new up to convalescence. But the poor fellow, who was terribly impatient, had attempted to get out of bed in spite of every warning, and on the seventh day from the passage of a clot of blood to the heart, which the nurse and the daughter had left him for a breath of fresh air.

"And so," went on the letter, "I found myself with the power to pay hands. I haven't told you anything but keep secret—positively shall never tell anybody—about it, and it would be cruel to her to say institutions. I feel that the venture which was to make me prosperous, for the right to ask you for yourself, has come to naught. By the time I had fixed everything up for my friend, he had to wait for me, had taken in another partner on the deal, and was prospering near Yreka—which but luck was against me. Then, both, the little girlie and herself fell sick with malaria, and so I come home to my pine trees again."

Here Geraldine's pen fell from his hand, for the fever had him in its grip, and he was shaking miserably. Later on he managed to put the letter into an envelope addressed only with her name, for after all he thought, she should never send it, and he left it on his table, thinking that when he was convalescent he would go on writing, just for the sake of the consolation it would be merely to pretend that he could tell her everything. But the letter was never finished. It grew impossible for him until one morning he found himself so sick that he could scarcely drag himself to the open air to the verandas to seat the landscape for the help that never came. For Lone Pine Ranch was isolated as only mountain ranches can be, and no one might set foot on it for weeks together. Now as he lay helpless, unable to move, lost sometimes in suffocating black-ness, the child brought him water in the tiny cup—drops that tantalized rather than quenched his thirst—and he wondered what would become of her, and in his last coherent moments told her to run out along the trail and call with all her might. That was the last thing he could do. Soon after he ceased to move, and did not hear the desolate wail that resounded through the empty house.

But Geraldine was not to lose himself forever in the dark waters of unconsciousness. Once more he felt himself alive, and on the verge of misery, lay with leaden spirits, unwilling to awake, till a memory of little Margery, whom he had last seen sweeping in a corner of the room, forced him to open his eyes. To his surprise his bed clothing covered him very neatly. The sheet was folded under his chin in a strange, comfortable new way, so that a sense of peace and security fell on him, and he lay very quiet for some time, before he could reason the reason that Margery was all right. Waking was wonderfully sweet. In the dim light of the darkened room a slender white hand glided over the smooth sheet, to smooth it to smoother. He held his breath and half closed his eyes that he might watch it. It went away. Too weak to turn his head, he waited till it fluttered down again with a coo of soft. There was no woman in the district with such a hand, and full of the wonder of it he fell asleep.

He dreamed of beautiful things—white flowers, white snow, white hands. Waking stronger for long rest, his first movement was one of curiosity. A woman, in a fresh white bonnet that completely shaded her face, was pouring something into a glass at the washstand. Was it possible that ugly bonnet could go with those slender fingers? He asked for a drink of water. To his joy the same hand appeared again.

"Is it evening?" he asked, when she had raised him easily to sip.

"No, it is morning," returned a voice like a wa little more than a whisper.

"Then please will you be so kind as to let in some light?"

"Light is not good for you just yet," was the answer in subdued tones.

Geraldine was not strong enough to dispute this point; and he lay quiet, inwardly vexed at the bonnet. Ideas came to him, slowly. At last he asked, brilliantly: "Will you please tell me who you are?"

"I am a nurse."

"A nurse!" He considered for some time.

"How did you come here?"

"That is very simple. Your little sister was sitting on the trail, and I came in and found you."

And that was the end; and nursed me how wonderfully good of you!"

"Not at all." The voice was cold. "You would have done the same yourself."

"Oh, but not in the way you are doing it," he returned humbly.

After that he pondered for a long while, for what happened to be passing," as though a road that led to nowhere were a much-frequented thoroughfare. And in itself was a mystery, and her beautiful hands, her movements, and the tone of a mouthful of woman, were something to brood upon.

"But why did you come here?" he asked, after a long silence. "No one ever comes here."

"I came for my brother."

He dared not ask her any more. He could only suppose that which he had even a dim perception of partnership in a promising "prospect," and had received from a friend. But of the long stage-journey from Redding through the heat and dust, he had fallen in with an unfortunate Englishman, very sick with typhoid, who had implored him to accompany him and see him on his legs again. Circumstances had been such that it had been impossible for any man humanity not to stay with this man and his wife in the midst of a mosquito camp. So he had nursed and tended him, and had experienced the satisfaction of pulling him new up to convalescence. But the poor fellow, who was terribly impatient, had attempted to get out of bed in spite of every warning, and on the seventh day from the passage of a clot of blood to the heart, which the nurse and the daughter had left him for a breath of fresh air.

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"Going away!" Dismay was in his voice.

"Yes, I am obliged to go. There's another nurse here to look after you."

"But I don't want another nurse," he cried. "And you've done so much for me. I can't even thank you. I don't know what your name is. I've never seen you even!"

She said nothing, but slowly measured something into a glass. He could not see that she was trembling.

"May I have a drink?" he asked, as she put down the tumbler.

She had intended to go now immediately. She felt she had lingered too long, but she could not refuse his request. She held the cup to his lips, and he drank slowly, looking at her hands, which would flutter away so soon, like white birds of passage. He was very weak, and the tears came into his eyes. The hands were so beautiful—so like her hands.

She took the cup and rinsed it carefully and softly. At the same moment little feet pattered along the passage and baby hands beat upon the door. She opened it and carried little Margery to the bedside, telling her to be very quiet. But Geraldine had turned his face to the wall, and took no notice. Having looked at him gravely, the child seated herself upon the floor, and began to examine the lamp of treasures in her lap. Suddenly she held out a chubby hand with an envelope.

"A letter!" she said, emphatically, to the strange lady. "A letter!"

"Is it for me, dear?"

"Yes, for 'oo!" She ran across the room, and held it out, triumphantly. The eyes under the sunbonnet glanced at it with indifference. Then at the name on it—a name with no address—the beautiful hands clutched it eagerly, a moment after a touch on Geraldine's shoulder forced him to turn.

"Here is a letter," said the quiet voice, "for a Miss Vining. The address is not finished. Do you wish it mailed?"

At the thought of her so far away, so inaccessible, Geraldine's eyes filled and he shook his head.

"No, no," he murmured, turning to the wall again. "It isn't to be posted. I haven't any right!" The next minute he began to call her, half-querulously, to give it to him that he might put it under his pillow. But the room was empty. She had gone.

Outside, on the veranda, she paced up and down with the unopened envelope in her hand. He had wanted it back. She had known that even as he had closed the door, just it didn't belong to him. With her name upon it, it certainly belonged to her. But she could not read it? Ought she? Well, she didn't care—she must! It was hers, after all. Tearing it open, she saw the tender superscription, and all her proud spirit vanished like the wind. Then she read it to the end and kissed it many times, and walking up and down, longed, yet hesitated, to go back into the darkened chamber.

Geraldine lay awake without any desire to take up the thread of life again. All his difficulties pressed upon him. All his felicitations were letters were not enough, and she had felt at the window, angry at her presumption